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BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

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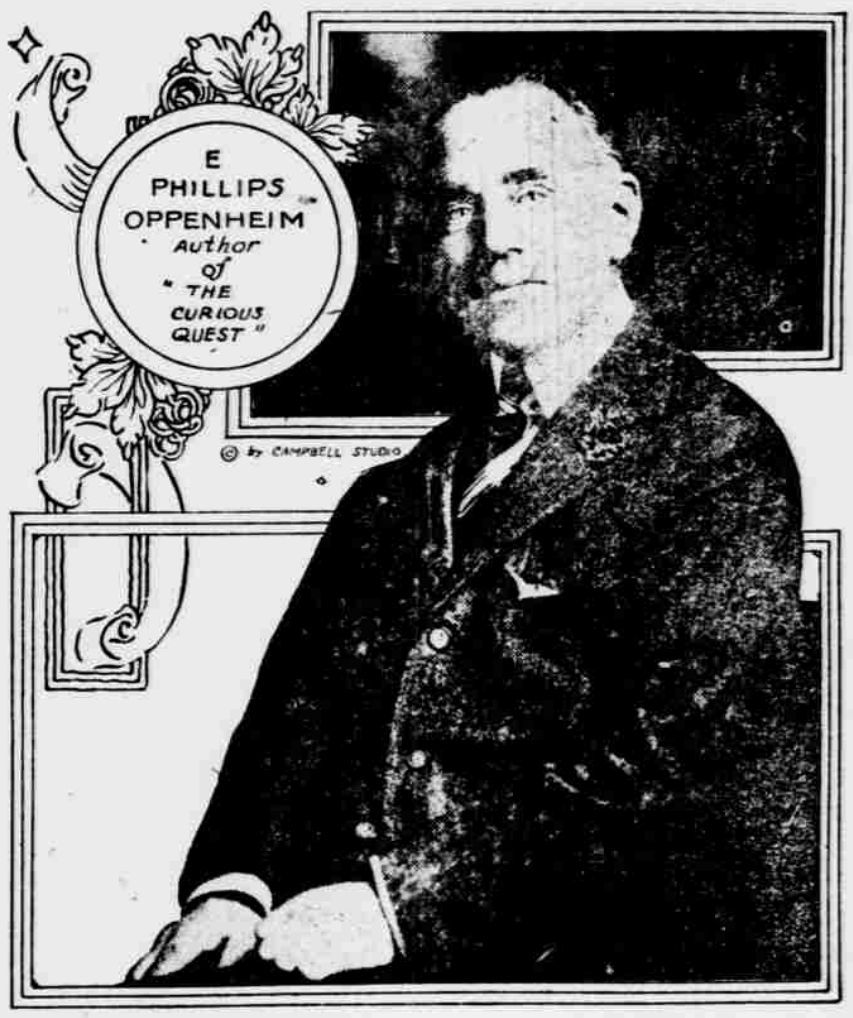
Oppenheim in Harley Street

A Physician (Yes! Yes!) and a Lovely Young Woman Take Steps to Help a Young Man Who Has the Bad Habit of Betting With His Money

FOR the purposes of literary persons we know no more useful thoroughfare than Harley street, Marylebone, London, England. It is not as famous as Baker street, which is only seven or eight squares west of it, but Baker street is preoccupied by Sherlock Holmes and made safe, as Professor Moriarty would say, against the entrance of ordinary fictional characters who would try to butt in. Baker street belongs to Sir Arthur, but Harley street is anybody's street when a doctor is needed for the book. Harley street in fiction is sacred to doctors. We are not sure whether Dr. Watson had his consultation rooms there after he got married and left Mrs. Hudson's lodging house, but if he hadn't he should have had.

Let a novelist name Harley street and the reader sinks back content. He knows that there is a doctor at hand; a fine practitioner, maybe with a beard, surely with courtly manners, a full waiting room and a sense of the dramatic. A patient comes in to consult the doctor.

"You have three days to live," says the sage physician, "and you can do what you please with them. Whatever you do will not affect the matter. You have wertyuiopio etaoinitis, a disease so rare that I have not seen a case since I was an interne in the sunstroke ward of the Crocker Land Hospital in 1889."



Or perhaps the Harley street doctor is more cheerful:

"Medicine can do nothing for you. What you must have is strife. Only terrific conflict with the forces of civilization will cure your remarkable ailment. Give up your present light employment at stoking in the Stepney gas factory and, fleeing to America, go to work in Manhattan and live in Brooklyn."

Sometimes the caller arrives in a cab with a crest on the door and wearing, among other items, a domino. The Harley street doctor is not to be fooled.

"I am indeed honored by the visit of your Grace," he says, "but I can do nothing for you. Downing street has already apprised me of your proposed attempt to strengthen your claim to the throne of Zingovania by removing the telltale wart from the tip of your left ear. Dr. Wilson is your man, not I."

Life in Harley Street.

Occasionally the physician is the goat. He has just turned in, or he is smoking a final pipe and listening to the storm without—Lord, what a night! Draw the curtains, Parkins—when a cab rattles into Harley street. The bell rings and Parkins lets in an Oriental person who planks down five thousand guineas on the doctor's table.

"For one hour's work," he whispers, "and silence. Come!" It is useless for the doctor to object. If he scorns the money the visitor makes a couple of passes over him or shoots a spray of odorless chloroform at the doc's face from the curious jade pin in his tie. At a low hiss two turbaned servants enter the house and take the unconscious physician out to the cab.

Such is life in Harley street, which, according to Charles Dickens's Dictionary of London (1882), is only a mile and 1,187 yards from Charing Cross station and two miles 670 yards from the Old Bailey. Persons who have been knocked in the Old Kent Road rarely call, as that famous place is five miles 294 yards away from the Avenue of the Doctors.

Having come well below the picture, the reader may be wondering what all this has to do with E. Phillips Oppenheim. Lots. *The Curious Quest*, which is Mr. Oppenheim's latest novel, instead of opening in the house of the Prime Minister, or the drawing room of a beautiful lady who is eager to betray England, or a restaurant in Soho where the lowest omnibus is the chief spy of the Sultan's ambitious aunt, opens in Harley street, in the waiting room of Sir James Aldroyd. Mr. Oppenheim refers to him as "Sir James Aldroyd, M. D.," which is wasting space, once having mentioned Harley street.

Doctor! Doctor!

It is no cab that has come to the door, but rather the eighty horse-power motor car of Mr. Ernest Bliss, who waits impatiently while Sir James treats patients who had come first. Novelists never describe these other patients in Harley street, although they may be afflicted with the most fascinating cases of influenza, hiccoughs, rickets, hives and shingles that ever happened. Ernest Bliss is the only patient whose symptoms are described and he has nothing interesting the matter with him; he's just off his feed and bored to death. Instead of roaming over his eight thousand acres of shooting in Norfolk or banging away on his grouse moor in Scotland, he has been keeping late hours in London. If good old Sherlock Holmes had examined the tires of the eighty horse-power car he probably would have discovered mud that could come only from a certain street in St. John's Wood; but the novel has nothing directly about that.

Sir James shows his contempt for Ernest's wasted life and scornfully advises him to go out and earn a living for himself. He adds that he doesn't believe it's in the young millionaire.

"You have no moral stamina," he says. "You might practise self-denial for a week—that would be about your limit. Young men of your type have not learned how to persevere. Will you shut the door after you as you go out, please?"

So Ernest Bliss, being cut to the quick, offers to bet Sir James a new wing for the doctor's hospital—25,000 pounds, it will cost—against an apology and a handshake that he will go out and into the cold world with a five-pound note and make his own living for a year.

So Ernest leaves Harley street and Sir James goes back to his regular trade of poorer but more attractive people who have come honestly by sunken cheeks or floating kidneys. In all the story we see him only twice again, much to our regret, for he is a grand character and just the man to refuse five thousand guineas from a mysterious Oriental at midnight. In the middle of the book, when Ernest, now so determined to get the coin by honest toil that he becomes a public chauffeur, drives Sir James (who of course doesn't recognize him) to the house of a patient, the reader has a a wish that the old boy would stay longer in the story. But back to Harley street Ernest takes him and when Sir James gives him a half sovereign Bliss thanks him and says he hopes the knight is getting his hand ready for that shake. "It is our young friend with the millions!" Sir James gasps. That is, Mr. Oppenheim has him gasp, but we doubt that he gasped. All the regular gasping in Harley street is done by the patients when they learn that they are suffering from a poison hitherto unknown except to the natives of the upper Orinoco. But Bliss chuckles, glides away and presently picks up a mysterious bareheaded man in evening dress.

A Beautiful Working Girl.

All this, however, has nothing to do with Frances, the heroine of the tale, a beautiful working girl whom Ernest meets and loves on his first job. She, unlike Sir James, runs all through the book, and she never goes to Harley street because she never has any ailment that a square meal cannot cure. She and Ernest don't eat much. It is all right, according to the rules of the bet, for Ernest to do magnificent things for other people, but he cannot profit by it; and, according to his way of reasoning, he dare not slyly send Frances enough money for food when she is out of work. Be sure, dear reader, whenever you bet a hospital wing against a handshake, to make it one of the conditions of the bet that, come what may, you will be able to see to it, through your aged and trusted lawyer, that your fiancée gets an occasional five pound note.

Well, anyway, creeping back to that fascinating street which, according to the well known Dickens, is a mile and 428 yards from Holborn Viaduct and about 300 yards still further from Ludgate Hill, we find Sir James once more in his consulting room and Ernest Bliss coming in with his bonny bride on his arm and twelve and sixpence in his pocket.

Now, having left Ernest and his wife without having detailed the remarkable adventures which Ernest had while trying to earn his own living, let us stroll down Harley street and see the houses where Gladstone and Barry Cornwall and Turner, the sunset painter, used to live. We may even go as far south as Cavendish Square and glance at the American consulate; but not much further than that, perhaps only as far as Holles street, where the bust of Lord Byron in front of the drapers' shop at No. 21 marks the house in which the poet was born. Only a few blocks further on lies Cork street, where Arnold Bennett's Pretty Lady lived; and that would never do.

THE CURIOUS QUEST. By E. Phillips Oppenheim. Little, Brown & Co. $1.50.